6. The Mutation of Agape and the Charisma-Institution Dilemma

The previous chapter reconstructed the *zig-zag* history of the secularization of *agape* in *A Secular Age*, showing how ethical gains, losses, and profound shifts in the moral imaginary coexist in modernity. This historical itinerary culminated in a paradox: although *agape* has been repeatedly eclipsed within the immanent frame, modern societies display an unprecedented sensitivity to suffering and a growing repertoire of altruistic action. Yet *A Secular Age* contains a provocative claim that unsettles this genealogy. Drawing on Ivan Illich, Taylor describes the institutionalization of Christian love as a "corruption of Christianity". This statement seems to contradict the broader account of historical mutations rather than degenerations reconstructed so far, and raises the question of how *agape* can be mediated—or distorted—by institutions:

> Here's where the corruption comes in: what we got was not a network of *agape*, but rather a disciplined society in which categorial relations have primacy, and therefore norms (...) Perhaps the contradiction lay in the very idea of a disciplined imposition of the Kingdom of God. The temptation of power was after all, too strong, as Dostoyevsky saw in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. Here lay the corruption" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 158).

Taylor's remark about the "corruption" of Christianity raises an immediate question: what exactly has been corrupted? He is not simply indicting the whole genealogy he has just reconstructed, but pointing to a more specific distortion. According to his own text, what has been corrupted is the charism of the Good Samaritan—an *agape*-inspired, spontaneous, bodily encounter with the wounded other—which has become institutionalized through codification and categorial relations. In the background lie power relations, into which the Church itself eventually falls. What is lost is the possibility of a new mode of relation that Taylor calls an *agape-network*: a space

of solidarity and mutuality beyond existing bonds and outside any stable social category or standard of obedience:

> "It is a skein of relations which link particular, unique, enfleshed people to each other, rather than a grouping of people together on the grounds of their sharing some important property (as in modern nations, we are all Canadians, Americans, French people; or universally, we are all rights-bearers, etc.)" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 739).

In this sense, the relationships that arise from the Samaritan's *agape*-based action tacitly question one of modernity's central achievements, namely the rights-based horizontality of a society of individuals. The charge of "corruption" fits Taylor's broader genealogy: the "revolution" of individualism undid the older embeddedness of the subject in cosmos, society and the sacred; the attempt to "make human beings better" and secure flourishing with diminishing reference to transcendence encouraged an ever-growing tendency to legislate, codify and normalize—religion and charity included.

The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to clarify this apparent contradiction by examining the tension between charisma and institution in Taylor's thought.[155] We begin by analyzing Illich's radical critique of institutionalized charity and its reception by Taylor. While Taylor occasionally adopts Illich's language of "corruption," his wider work points instead toward a more ambivalent notion of mutation, one that recognizes both losses and genuine moral advances. We will argue that Taylor's real target is not institutions as such, but the modern fixation on rules, procedures, and codification—what he calls "nomolatry"—which threatens to sever altruistic action from its deeper moral sources. Against this backdrop, we introduce Taylor's notion of the *agape-network*, a fragile yet generative mode of social relation grounded in compassion and openness to transcendence.

In the second part of the chapter, we turn to a question that has received much less attention: the charisma–institution relationship in the practice of altruism. Taking up Illich's challenge, how is it that we move from the subversive and heroic spontaneity of the Good Samaritan to an almost universal recognition of altruism, pre-

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155 The secondary literature on this passage has largely asked how this accusation of "corruption of Christianity" fits Taylor's historical narrative and how closely it aligns with Ivan Illich's work (Arens, 2018; Gregory & Hunt-Hendrix, 2014; Herdt, 2014; Lehmann, 2011).

dominantly mediated today by "humanitarian aid, and the action of NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières, but also on the governmental level" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 693)? Put differently: is the institutionalization of neighbour-love—in the form of NGOs and organized charity, faith-based or not—a corruption of *agape*, or can the inspiration of *agape* be embodied in institutions without being exhausted by them? Illich formulates this tension in the starkest possible terms. Taylor receives this provocation sympathetically, yet does not follow him all the way. To see why, we must first reconstruct Illich's position.

6.1. Ivan Illich's challenge to charities

Taylor first encountered Illich's thought when David Cayley invited him to write the foreword to the book collecting the radio conversations in which Illich, near the end of his life, unfolded his views on Gospel, Church and society (cf. 'The Corruption of Christianity: Ivan Illich on Gospel, Church and Society', 2000; Illich, 2005a):

> "In the age of the Church, the idea of the neighbor who constantly lives encountering Christ in the unknown who knocks at his door and asks for hospitality, this idea of acting out of a love which is a gift gets corrupted by being defined as something which can be institutionalized, which charitable institutions can do much better than a bunch of individual Christians" ('The Corruption of Christianity: Ivan Illich on Gospel, Church and Society', 2000; Illich, 2005a, p. 64).

Something essential to the radical originality of the Gospel has been lost in the historical development of the Church and the institutionalization of its practices. Though Illich's immediate focus here is the love of neighbour, his critique reaches the whole institutional construction of the Church and, by extension, of modern society. The uncontrollable radicality and contingent novelty of the Incarnation,[156] he argues, faces a constant danger of institutional capture:

> "The opening of this new horizon is also accompanied by a second danger: institutionalization. There is a temptation to try to manage and, eventually, to legislate this new love, to create an institution that will guarantee it, insure it, and protect it by criminalizing its opposite. So, along with this new ability to give freely of oneself has appeared the

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156 I understand "uncontrollability" in the same terms as Hartmut Rosa (2020).

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possibility of exercising an entirely new kind of power, the power of those who organize Christianity and use this vocation to claim their superiority as social institutions. This power is claimed first by the Church and later by the many secular institutions stamped from its mould. Wherever I look for the roots of modernity, I find them in the attempts of the churches to institutionalize, legitimize, and manage Christian vocation" (Illich, 2005a, pp. 47–48)

This passage concentrates Illich's rich and radical vision of Western history—his "heterodox orthodoxy". The alteration of the original charism is captured in the adage *corruptio optimi pessima*:[157] literally, the corruption of the best is the worst. The novelty and freedom introduced by the Incarnation, and by the ethical revolution of the Gospel, are prolonged in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37). The Samaritan helps the wounded stranger moved by an encounter and by a visceral compassion (*splangnizesthai*). His action is free from prior collective identities and even from a stable modern "I": it stems from the call of the neighbor, behind whom stands God and God's own love, that is, *agape* as moral source. The Samaritan is thus both free and summoned: his freedom is constituted by the call of the other.

Illich describes this as a "new proportionality": a new social relation not grounded in given bonds but in *agape*-love, mirroring the Trinitarian relationship manifested in the Incarnation. In his own words, the parable reveals that "who is my neighbor" is determined by the free act of turning toward the other in love and inviting him into a mutuality that usually goes under the name of friendship (Illich, 2005a, p. 197). The Samaritan discovers himself most deeply precisely by being allowed to love the other; the call of *agape* elevates the proportionality of creation to a level previously unseen. A "new kind of 'ought'" appears here—one that "has a telos" and "aims at somebody, some body; but not according to a rule" (Illich, 2005a, p. 177).

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157 Different sources attribute this proverb to Aristotle, St. Jerome or St. Thomas Aquinas. However, there is no evidence that it was used prior to Pope St. Gregory the Great. It is a phrase used to warn that corruption, always reprehensible, is more so when the perpetrator is the one who is supposed to be a model for others. Pope Francis has used it in his writings: "Corruptio optimi pessima, saint Gregory the Great said with good reason, affirming that no one can think himself immune from this temptation" (Pope Francis, 2015, §19).

For Illich, modernity interrupts this new proportionality. Modern subjects understand proportionality in terms of social contract and freedom as self-determination. The Samaritan, by contrast, neither enacts a contract nor seeks emancipation in the modern sense; he inaugurates a relationship grounded in compassion and call, not in rights and claims. The usual interpretation of the parable, however, has gone in the opposite direction. As a historian of Christianity, Illich surveyed sermons from the third to the nineteenth centuries and identified a decisive shift: the story is read less as an answer to "Who is my neighbor?" and more as a lesson on "how to act", easily integrated into a progressive history of ethics. From within this perspective, as Taylor observes, the parable appears as "a stage on the road to a universal morality of rules" (Taylor, 2005, p. xii). Norms and rules—an ethics of "how" rather than of "who"—thereby corrupt the original message: no rule can predetermine who my neighbor is.

Illich is convinced that a *de-nomolatization*—a liberation from rule-worship—would mean a return to the Samaritan's freedom, dependent only on inspiration and on the contingent, intermittent appearance of *agape*. Yet precisely this contingency and fragility render such freedom unsustainable. As Cayley notes, this form of freedom "stands on a razor's edge", upheld only by trust and forgiveness (Cayley, 2021, pp. 357–358). The tensions that forgiveness introduces into justice, and that love introduces into any social system, make the delicate relational form of *agape* highly vulnerable to being replaced by codified duty, security and control.

For Illich, the institutionalization of neighbour-love—above all, the transformation of the Church into a charity institution—marks this rupture:

> "In the early years of Christianity, it was customary in a Christian household to have an extra mattress, a bit of a candle, and some dry bread in case the Lord Jesus should knock at the door in the form of a stranger without a roof — a form of behaviour that was utterly foreign to any of the cultures of the Roman Empire. You took in your own but not someone lost on the street. [...] And the first corporations they started were Samaritan corporations which designated certain categories of people as preferred neighbours. For example, the bishops created special houses, financed by the community, that were charged with taking care of people without a home. Such care was no longer the

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free choice of the householder; it was the task of an institution" (Illich, 2005a, p. 54).

From a modern perspective, it may seem paradoxical that founding philanthropic institutions could be an affront to freedom. Illich's point is that the gratuity of choice opened by *agape*, as experienced by the Samaritan, becomes impossible under institutionalization. In seeking to secure the supreme freedom of *agape*, the Church transforms it first into an ideal duty, then into a legislated one. As Calley rightly portrays: "The possibility of making a new community out of unrelated people who share their breath turns into the social contract on which the modern state is founded" (Cayley, 2005, p. 36).

Illich calls this process the "mystery of evil" (Illich, 2005a, p. 56): the greatest good becoming the greatest evil, *corruptio optimi pessima*. Modernity thus appears as the offspring of a corrupted Gospel—an inverted form of faith (cf. Cayley, 2021, p. 385). At its root lies the loss of the original vocation through the alliance of Church and power. The founding of charitable institutions does not extinguish the call to love the neighbor, but it does annihilate the original freedom born of *agape* as a desirable, non-imposed duty. For Illich, the attempt "to use power, organization, management, and the law to ensure the social presence" of a love that can only be freely chosen is precisely what justifies speaking of "corruption" and "perversion" (Illich, 2005a, p. 56). The seeds of this perversion, which Illich—like Taylor—locates around the twelfth century, germinate in the corruption of Samaritan morality and in the emergence of institutions that designate "certain categories of people as preferred neighbours" (Illich, 2005a, p. 54): a shift from hospitality to delegated service, and from a free Samaritan to an anxious, "scrupulous" subject (Illich, 2005, p. 193).[158]

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158 Modernity, for Illich, wherever we look, is the manifestation of the same internal dynamic. Firstly an authentic freedom born of the Gospel, which brakes with the boundaries of any given culture or society. Out of that experience, a civilization is born whose desire for improvement, expansion and control of the contingent finds no limits. But the original force comes from faith. Its perversion and corruption by institutionalization and normativization is a dynamic that manifests itself throughout his work, an "understatement", as Taylor puts it (Taylor, 2005a, p. ix). To give two examples, in *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 1971), he shows how public education and mass schooling, far from

According to Illich, then, the institutionalization of charity, missionary outreach and humanitarian efforts has corrupted the original call of Samaritan neighbor-love.[159] It is this diagnosis that Taylor partly adopts and partly resists.

6.1.1. Evaluating Illich's position

David Cayley understands this driving idea of Illich's thought as a conservative and reactionary discourse (cf. Cayley, 2021, p. 382). His description of the deviations from the Gospel that underlie modern institutions and ideologies aims to return to a past time, to an original church, where proportionalities were lived in a natural union between Heaven and Earth and between all human beings. The logic of reactionary thinking is certainly reflected in his writings in what Albert O. Hirschman calls the "perversity hypothesis": "the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction" (Hirschman, 1991, p. 11).

From our point of view, however, Illich's aim is not so much to react and return to a pristine time when everything was better, denouncing ill-constructed good intentions. On the contrary, his *programme* is revolutionary and subversive, defending a social change, trying to go beyond the deceits of the ideologies that justify structures that end up spoiling what the human being is called (vocationally) to be. In a way, he is a Rousseaunian, seeking to humanize human beings by disempowering institutions. He is also a transcendent humanist—an anarchist thinker "at the margins"(cf. Nursey-Bray, 1992, pp. 124–127) —concerned less with political structures in a narrow sense than with the moral core of culture and civilization.

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ending inequality and lack of knowledge, increases them. In *Medical Nemesis*, the opening sentence sums it up perfectly: "The medical establishment has become a major threat to health" (Illich, 1976, p. 3).

159 Illich became even more radical in this idea from the 1960s onwards (see Bruno-Jofré & Zaldívar, 2016). In fact, he caused an immense impact in 1970 with his article "The Powerless Church", calling for its withdrawal from specific social initiatives, particularly the US Peace Corps in Latin America at the height of the Cold War. For Illich, the Church's institutional power distances it from the mission entrusted by Jesus to the apostles (cf. Illich, 2018, pp. 134–139). See also "The Seamy Side of Charity", "The Vanishing Clergyman", and "To Hell with Good Intentions" in the same volume (Illich, 2018, pp. 90–127).

For Illich, the genuine freedom from which a morality of mutuality arises comes from the grace of *agape*.

The charisma–institution dialectic in Illich is often interpreted as a straightforward story of decline: original experiences of grace are inevitably corrupted by their institutionalization. In this respect, his position resembles certain sociological diagnoses. Indeed, authors such as Weber understand the relationship between the charisma of a personality and its institutionalization and bureaucratization (in his words, routinization) as a degradation in terms of suppression of the remnants of enchantment and its changeover as rationalization (cf. Weber, 2013, pp. 497–512, 1996; Miyahara, 1983; Adair-Toteff, 2021). Others, such as Durkheim, distinguish periods of effervescence and the creation of collective values and ideals (with less prominence of charismatic leaders) from other more stable periods of organization and more mechanical or organic solidarity, which also entail a degradation (cf. Durkheim, 2008; P. Smith, 2021).

Francesco Alberoni offers a different perspective that is useful for our purposes. He shifts the focus from individual leaders to entire societies and asks how *nascent states*—moments of collective enthusiasm and founding charisma—are transformed when institutionalized (cf. Alberoni, 1984, p. 7). In Alberoni's account, institutions fulfil a dual function: they "extinguish the nascent state and ensure its continuity in another way" (Alberoni, 1984, p. 216). Some of the original charisma is inevitably lost, but institutions also act as vessels of inheritance. His approach, though criticized as historically thin and conceptually unoriginal (cf. Calhoun, 1986), offers an eloquent alternative to Illich's narrative of unrelieved degeneration. Without denying bureaucratization and rationalization, Alberoni also allows for ethical advancement or growth—precisely what seems absent in Illich's almost uniformly negative reading of Christian history and doctrinal development.

Unlike Alberoni, Taylor does not read rationalization as the hallmark of Western moral progress (cf. Alberoni & Veca, 1988; Taylor, 2011j). On the contrary, rationalization in the form of codification appears, for him, as one of the most visible signs of the degeneration to which institutionalization can lead. Yet Taylor also refuses Illich's stark verdict. Something of the ethical leap inaugurated by Christianity does remain in institutional forms such as the Church. The price of codification, however, is the loss—or at least the obscuring—

of the state Taylor names the *agape-network*. As later chapters will suggest, the return of such states of *agape* is usually mediated by charismatic figures and leaders with one foot in transcendence and one foot in reality, if the image may be allowed.

In this way, Taylor stands between Illich and Alberoni. He shares Illich's sensitivity to the dangers of institutionalization and to the betrayal of *agape* through codification, but—closer to Alberoni—he insists on the possibility of ethical growth and on the enduring, if transformed, presence of Christian moral sources in modern institutions. It is precisely this mediating position that will allow him to move from the language of "corruption" to that of "mutation", and to rethink the charisma–institution dilemma in terms of *agape-networks* and modern civil society.

6.1.2. Corruption or Mutation?

Taylor openly acknowledges the striking affinity between his own account of modernity and Illich's historical diagnosis: "the basic thesis of my account was similar to Illich's. But I had no idea of the parallels until David Cayley brought Illich's thought to public attention" (Taylor, 2005, p. x). Both trace the origins of modernity to the drive for religious and moral purity characteristic of the Reformation, and both see in the parable of the Good Samaritan an eruption of divine love into the human historical order. Yet their similarities conceal two fundamental differences.

First, Taylor does not describe this history as a *corruption* or *perversion* of Christianity in other places despite occasionally using Illich's term in *A Secular Age*. He prefers the notion of *mutation*: a morally ambivalent transformation within the moral imaginary rather than a straightforward decline. Second, Illich sees institutionalization as necessarily betraying *agape*, whereas Taylor grants institutions a more ambiguous, and potentially indispensable, role—as long as they remain connected to the vertical moral sources that inspired them. In this respect, *agape-networks* become central to Taylor's politics of recognition and to his hopes for democratic renewal.

For both thinkers, the detachment of *agape* from its transcendent source and its relocation within the *immanent frame* marks a de-

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cisive historical shift: what began as transformative, gratuitous love becomes a moral and political impulse to make the world more humane, civilized and egalitarian. Modern altruism retains a trace of grace, but one severed from its embodied origins. This is what Taylor calls *excarnation*. Thus, secularization does not diminish concern for the needy, but it does obscure the freedom of *agape*—a freedom in which the individual is chosen by transcendence and, in turn, freely chooses the other in love. What is lost is the tangibility of love and the mutual presence of embodied persons. Taylor's summary is stark:

> "The enfleshment of God extends outward, through such new links as the Samaritan makes with the Jew, into a network, which we call the Church (…) The corruption of this new network comes when it falls back into something more 'normal' in worldly terms (…) The monstrous comes from a corruption of the highest, the *agape-network*. Corrupted Christianity gives rise to the modern" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 739–740).

The *agape-network* denotes precisely this new mode of fittingness: a dissymmetric proportionality grounded in response to a call rather than in the application of a prior code. It is not reducible to instinct or sentiment—though *agape* involves visceral compassion (*splang-nizesthai*)—but anchored in a reference to God and the Incarnation (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 739). Because of this reference, an *agape-network* is not categorical: it does not identify the Incarnation with a particular political order, moral code, or institution. Nor does it supply ontological justification for an ecclesial structure aspiring to worldly power. Instead, it seeks "the further, greater transformation which Christian faith holds out, the raising of human life to the divine (*theiosis*)" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 737), a transformation reaching into the social sphere.[160]

Illich's influence on Taylor is undeniable, but Taylor mitigates the radical discontinuity Illich posits between the Samaritan's *agape* and modern morality. For Illich, every development beyond the original experience of Christianity, including its doctrinal evolution, is a corruption. Taylor, by contrast, sees the benefits modernity has offered to Christianity and solidarity. He affirms the moral importance

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160 Taylor uses the theological concept of "communion of saints" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 754) to describe what the *agape-network* consists of, once again with a reference to the *catholic attitude* in his work that we have been defending

of plural understandings of the good, including those historically derived from *agape*. Thus, although he deploys the language of "corruption" in *A Secular Age*, he elsewhere speaks explicitly of *mutation* (Taylor, 2005, p. x). "Corruption," he notes in another context, has a strongly normative resonance, presupposing a fixed "normal form" from which deviation must be judged (Taylor, 2004, p. 78). By using "mutation," Taylor signals a more neutral, genealogical understanding of moral transformation and safeguards the legitimate role of institutions in modern life.[161]

His judgment of modernity is therefore more ambivalent—and more capacious—than Illich's (Gregory & Hunt-Hendrix, 2014, p. 231; Ricken, 2011, p. 267; Siep, 2011a).[162] Even acknowledging the dangers and malaises of modernity (Taylor, 2004), Taylor can praise Bertrand Russell's universal benevolence as "an important achievement, a milestone in human history" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 255, cf. 572). Similarly, as he argued in an earlier essay, the end of Christendom "made possible what we now recognize as a great advance in the practical penetration of the gospel in human life" (Taylor, 1999b, p. 18). The demands of the Gospel became more effective precisely because they were no longer co-opted by political interests.

This moral advance, however, does not eliminate tragedy. Modernity exposes us to the paradoxes of solidarity: "Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières" share the same historical space as "Auschwitz and Hiroshima" (Taylor, 1999b, p. 37). The tension between the heights of moral aspiration and the depths of human

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161 He defines cultural mutation in another place: "By 'cultural mutation' I mean a change at once in social discipline, social arrangements and self-understanding which brings about a new human possibility" (Taylor, 1978, p. 133).

162 However, Taylor points out the incompleteness of the project of modernity: "with cultural fragmentation, loss of meaning both individually and socially, and how we might respond to this problem that modernity seems everywhere to create" (Connolly, 2010, p. 43). José Casanova's study is very helpful in situating Taylor's thinking on modernity. Casanova divides accounts of modernity into four types: histories of secularist triumph; defenses of a lost normative age; identification of modernity as a process of internal secularization of Christian principles; and Nietzschean genealogies of the illegitimacy of secular modernity and its moral model as its bastard Christian lineage. Taylor would challenge all these histories but would incorporate into his *zig-zag* history elements of all four types (cf. Casanova, 2010, pp. 267–269; see also Bellah, 2010). For a view of Taylor's modernity and its problems, see (Taylor, 2004, pp. 1–23, 1995d, see also 2017c).

horror is not a contradiction of Taylor's account but part of the *zigzagging* history of ethical growth explored in the previous chapter. In this light, Taylor's shift from "corruption" to "mutation" reflects a refusal of Illich's stark dualism. It allows him to hold together two insights: institutions can obscure *agape* through codification, yet they also carry forward—however imperfectly—the moral energies unleashed by the Gospel. This ambivalence is precisely what opens space for the *agape-network* to reappear in modern society, not as a replacement for institutions, but as their necessary critique and renewal.

6.1.3. Institutionalization as nomolatry

Taylor's engagement with Illich allows him to deepen a theme already implicit in *Sources of the Self*: the fetishism of rules characteristic of modern morality. Illich interprets the attempt to convert the *agape-network* into "a code of rules enforced by organizations erected for this purpose" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 737), as a profound betrayal of the relational novelty introduced by the Gospel. Taylor develops this insight by contrasting the *agape-network* with the modern moral order:

> "*agape* […] can't ever be understood simply in terms of a set of rules, but rather as the extension of a certain kind of relation, spreading outward in a network. The church is in this sense a quintessentially network society, even though of an utterly unparalleled kind, in that the relations are not mediated by any of the historical forms of relatedness: kinship, fealty to a chief, or whatever. It transcends all these, but not into a categorical society based on similarity of members, like citizenship; but rather into a network of ever different relations of *agape*" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 282)

Yet Taylor does not conclude, as Illich sometimes appears to, that codes themselves are the problem. "We can't live without codes, legal ones which are essential to the rule of law, moral ones which we have to inculcate in each new generation" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 743). Illich's point is, according to Taylor, that codes "is not all there is" (ibid.). Reliance on objective norms alone risks a dehumanization of moral agency and obscures the deeper moral sources capable of

transforming entrenched conflicts. Taylor thus warns that even the most progressive codes can conceal numerous traps:

> "Codes, even the best codes, can become idolatrous traps, which tempt us to complicity in violence. Illich can remind us not to become totally invested in the code, even the best code of a peace-loving, egalitarian, liberalism. We should find the centre of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 743).

In modernity, citizenship among equals replaces the *agape-network*, and code fetishism or nomolatry gains strength (Taylor, 2007b, p. 707, cf. 2011f, pp. 353–354). Code fetshism or nomolatry means "that the entire spiritual dimension of human life is captured in a moral code" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 353) —a reductionism Taylor detects in Kant and in contemporary moral theories such as Rawls's or Habermas's. This reduction impoverishes motivation toward charity and benevolence, which become, in Taylor's words, "too pale and tame" (Taylor, 2007, p. 311) when severed from embodied devotion to God. It also occludes the "vertical dimension" of human life: the articulation of goods and the openness to transcendence shaping interpersonal and social relations.

Within this framework, *agape* acts not as a replacement for justice or codes but as a counterpart capable of transforming hardened situations of violence, injustice, and mutual mistrust. This becomes especially relevant in the politics of recognition, where purely horizontal solutions often fail. In line with the New Testament's freedom from the Law, Taylor's approach seeks to move beyond moralism without dismissing the legitimacy of codes altogether (cf. Herdt, 2014, p. 208). We need moral (and legal, by extension) codes; the point is precisely that no code can capture all situations. Even within the broader structure of ethical life, codes are incapable of accommodating the full range of dilemmas—such as those involving freedom and equality, or justice and mercy.

In this sense, Taylor speaks of two dimensions in which conflict resolution at the social and political levels can be carried out. One is the horizontal dimension, which seeks to find a "fair" point of resolution between the parties, after negotiation, by giving each a fair price to pay for peace. An example of this is the case of Bosnia

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and the partition of the country into two separate communities after the Dayton Peace Accords.

By contrast, vertical horizons have a different transforming potential: "The vertical space opens the possibility that by rising higher, you'll accede to a new horizontal space where the resolution will be less painful or damaging for both parties" (Taylor, 2011f, p. 350). Here Taylor refers to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the leadership of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela.[163] Vertical dimension "is one of reconciliation and trust" (Taylor, 2011f, p. 350). It moves in history, like those of Mandela and Tutu, or like that of the Samaritan. This is the horizon of Christian *agape*: unshaped by a fixed code, without formulaic prescriptions, and capable of opening new moral possibilities that no legal framework could predefine. The difficulty, of course, lies in how this primordial freedom coexists with institutional forms within modernity, generating tensions between charisma and institution.

Taylor's conviction is that openness to the vertical dimension, in which *agape* is found, can make us more capable of resolving entrenched conflicts in which all parties have a claim on each other. The application of codes and justice, although necessary, cannot restore the necessary trust between the conflicting parties to allow for the possibility of a new communion. The example of the Truth Commissions shows that *codes are not all there is*.

6.2. Hegelian explorations

The preceding section has shown how Taylor partially receives Illich's critique of institutionalized neighbour-love while deliberately shifting from the language of *corruption* to that of *mutation*. We also explored how Taylor's reading of Illich is tied to his defence of *agape-networks* as relational spaces that stand as an alternative

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163 We shall return to this specific case later in our discussion on recognition. In any case, various reports confirm that adopting only the horizontal dimension for conflict resolution is insufficient, as is clearly seen in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (See, for example, Avramovic, 2017; Wilkes, 2022). In addition, several reports and academic works see the potential of religion and faith-based organizations to achieve higher rates of reconciliation and trust between conflicting factions (See Peruaka, 2003; see also Uysal, 2016).

to moral codes and resist the "code fetishism" of modernity. Yet this leaves an important question unresolved: how does Taylor understand the role of institutions themselves? To what extent does he share Illich's suspicion of institutionalization, and how does his own account of social order complicate or correct Illich's radical diagnosis? At stake is John Milbank's penetrating question:

> How do we acknowledge the truth of Illich's insights while still saluting the uniquely practical bent of Latin Christianity? How do we allow that some procedure and institutionalization is required without destroying the interpersonal?" (Milbank, 2009, p. 103).

One route toward an answer lies in returning to Taylor's long-standing engagement with Hegel. From early in his career, Taylor has drawn on Hegel to illuminate the interplay between particularity and idealization and to describe how "ethical substance" persists even as its expressions mutate. These insights help clarify Taylor's view of the charisma–institution dilemma. Moreover, Taylor's reflections on Hegelian civil society and political alienation shed light on the institutional spaces—such as NGOs—that arise within the modern *social imaginary* and that bear a complex genealogical relation to *agape*. Nevertheless, as we shall see, however significant Hegel's influence on Taylor may be, it is not sufficient to explain the function of the "*agape-network*".

With this in mind, we turn first to Taylor's reading of Hegel's distinction between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*.

6.2.1. Moralität and Sittlichkeit in Taylor's perspective

It is generally known that Taylor understands Hegel from both the influence that Romanticism had on him and from the expressivist character of his philosophy as a reaction to the detached character of the rationalist trends emphasizing instrumental reason (cf. Taylor, 1989a, pp. 384–385, 1977a, 1979, p. 72; Browne & Lynch, 2018, p. 66; Honneth, 2018). Moreover, Hegel's concern with overcoming alienation and realizing *Absolute Freedom* provides Taylor with analytical tools to parse political and social alienation as well as the limitations of institutional performance within the immanent framework at work in the modern social imaginary (Cf. Taylor, 2004, 2007b, pp.

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159–211; see also Rosa, 1998; Kühnlein, 2008). By and large, albeit with nuances, Hegel's influence is clear in the importance of Romantic expressivism, the importance of "ethical life" and community in shaping one's identity, and in Taylor's own view of the crisis of representative democracy (Cf. Browne & Lynch, 2018, pp. 67–71).

The latter three aspects can be found in *Hegel's* Sittlichkeit *and the Crisis of Representative Institutions* (Taylor, 1978), a paper given at a conference on the philosophy of history in 1974—that is, shortly before the publication of his well-known works on Hegel (1977a, 1979). The article deals with the crisis of representative democracy, i.e., the lack of adherence of citizens to its institutions. Its thesis is straightforward: "My suggestion is that the present malaise in Western representative democracies can most fruitfully be seen in the language of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit and* the corresponding notion of alienation" (Taylor, 1978, p. 147).[164]

Alienation occurs when rules, as expressed in social practices, cease to command people's allegiance either because they are regarded as irrelevant or are seen as a kind of threat: "alienation arises when the goals, norms or ends which define the common practices or institutions begin to seem irrelevant or even monstrous, or when the norms are redefined so that the practices appear a travesty of them" (Taylor, 1978, p. 141).

This anticipates Taylor's later critique of the fetishism of norms. The crisis of legitimacy in democracy mirrors, analogously, the tension between charisma and institution: institutions lose their animating sources and become hollow, procedural, or coercive. Yet unlike purely structural accounts, Taylor emphasizes that alienation ultimately stems from the *difficulty contemporary people face in defining their own identity*, which is itself shaped by these alienated structures.[165]

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164   The context of the article is also interesting. Taylor is concerned with clarifying the consequences of social fragmentation, i.e., the increasing lack of connections between individuals and society as a whole, applied specifically to participation in the institutions of democracy.

165   Taylor also deals with the problem of legitimacy in *Legitimation Crisis?* (Taylor, 1985i), where he answers in some way to the proposals that explain the crisis of legitimacy of capitalist societies by the contradictions they face (cf. Habermas, 1973). Here Taylor is again Hegelian, in the expressivist and moral sense: "what we need to get clearer [...] is the family of conceptions of the

Crucially, for Taylor, community, institutions, and shared values are constitutive of self-identity. Human beings are always socially situated; there is no fully atomized self. Sociability is "an essential constitutive condition of seeking the human good" (Taylor, 1985j, p. 292). Institutions and social practices express shared understandings of the human being, society, the natural world, religion, spirituality, and solidarity. These shared understandings form part of what Taylor elsewhere calls our "inescapable frameworks" of morality and spirituality (Taylor, 1989a, p. 3ff).

Yet, it is worth noting that community, including its institutions and common values, is essential for the expression of one's own self-identity, according to Taylor. The individual is always situated, is within society. There is no place for a full human being completely atomized and isolated from society. Sociability becomes "an essential constitutive condition of seeking the human good" (Taylor, 1985j, p. 292). Hegel's distinction between *Moralität*—the sphere of articulated norms and theoretical claims—and *Sittlichkeit*—the pre-reflective ethical life embodied in practices and values—helps Taylor articulate this dynamic. As he writes: "it is of crucial importance whether or not men (sic.) define their identity at least in part by the values and ideas expressed in their common, public institutions, and by the way they are expressed there" (Taylor, 1978, p. 145).

Solidarity with strangers can thus be understood, in Taylor's terms, as part of the *Sittlichkeit* of modern societies: a pre-political moral intuition that precedes legal codification. This aligns with the genealogy traced in previous chapters: the secularization of *agape* has produced a historically fragile but persistent concern for the suffering of the other.

Returning to the charisma–institution dilemma: the existence of NGOs and humanitarian institutions—the "third sector"—can be viewed as one way modernity expresses this moral identity. These

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good life, the notions of what it is to be human, which have grown up with modern society and have framed the identity of contemporary men. This set of conceptions is, of course, essentially linked to the economic and political structures which have developed in the last centuries [...]. It is only by articulating these conceptions that we can identify the conditions of a legitimation crisis of contemporary society. For these will define the terms in which institutions, practices, disciplines, structures will be recognized as legitimate or marked out as illegitimate" (Taylor, 1985i, pp. 248–249).

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institutions are ambivalent products of the *zig-zagging* history of *agape*: they retain a genealogical trace of their origin, even if much has been lost through mutation. They also respond to the modern dilemma of solidarity: high moral demands combined with a diminished articulation of moral sources.

Illich insists that the institutionalization of *agape-networks* constitutes a corruption of Christian identity. We do not suggest here that NGOs are *agape-networks*; rather, they stand downstream from the historical force of *agape*. Despite the losses introduced by institutionalization, NGOs persist as significant sites of self-interpretation for modern subjects—spaces where people seek to satisfy high moral expectations and articulate aspirations toward the Good. Taylor himself notes similar trends in religious identity: younger generations often pursue spirituality and authentic self-expression outside institutional structures, in privatized or fluid forms (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 513–522, see also 1992b, 2003b, 2008). Not infrequently, the channeling of altruistic desire occurs through NGOs and some volunteer work, something that has remained constant and intensifies at times when the need for social cohesion and solidarity is manifest, as most recently in the COVID pandemic (ILOSTAT, 2020), the reception of refugees in Germany in 2015 and throughout Europe during the Ukraine crisis. Philanthropy has been battered by cultural capitalism (Žižek, 2010) and corrupted by power (Illich), but it still invites human beings to seek and do the Good.

6.2.2. Civil society and the role of charitable institutions

To assess how Taylor departs from Illich, we must examine his understanding of civil society, a notion deeply informed by his reading of Hegel. In particular, the genealogical analysis of the *mutations* that led to the separation of state and civil society can lead us to understand the role of entities such as charitable institutions as sites of expression of modern identity and as vehicles of modern high standards of solidarity with others.

For Taylor, civil society refers to those spheres of social life that enjoy relative autonomy from the state. Civil society and voluntary association play an important role in articulating freedom in society: "No society can be called free in which these voluntary associations

are not able to function" (Taylor, 1995e, p. 258). In several places, Taylor shows Hegel's influence on his vision of civil society. For Hegel, according to Taylor, civil society would be "a separate sphere, but not self-sufficient" (Taylor, 1990b, p. 114, 1991c, p. 132, 1995f, p. 222). Indeed, the sphere of civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) appears in *Philosophy of Rights* within the *Sittlichkeit* as a middle ground between the family and the state (Hegel, 1802, §§ 158–256).[166] For both Hegel and Taylor, it is not only about the existence of autonomous associations free from the tutelage of the State but defines "a pattern of public social life" (Taylor, 1990b, p. 111, 1991c, p. 129, 1995f, p. 219).

What is this pattern? For Hegel, as well as in the debates of his time, two areas were of importance regarding civil society which gave rise, gradually, to the "public", that is, independent of the state: the self-regulating economy and opinion. Moreover, Hegel extended this pattern to include independent associations with non-political ends that "form the basis for the fragmentation and diversity of power within the political system" (Taylor, 1990b, p. 114). It is a third space, then, between the subjectivization and sentimentalization of family life and the objectivity of the State. It is a third sphere, in any case, to escape from the tendency of the State to absolutization, routinization, bureaucratization and the excessive weight of rules. But it is also a space for the construction of one's own identity, collective ties, effective action, and care.

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166 Especially in the German speaking context, a distinction is made between *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* and *Zivilgesellschaft*. The former usually refers to society as a whole with emphasis on social structure, private rights and associated institutions. In contrast, *Zivilgesellschaft* refers more to citizen participation and the formation of networks, social movements, organizations and non-governmental associations that seek to influence public affairs with a clear interest in the exercise of citizen rights and responsibilities. Although their meanings are often overlapping, the emergence of the second concept can be understood as the fruit of criticisms of the Hegelian concept of civil society, initiated especially by Karl Marx (1983) and Antonio Gramsci (2014). We note that in this part of our study the meanings overlap, whereby we sometimes refer to Hegelian civil society from the parameters of *Zivilgesellschaft*, where the role of non-governmental organizations involved in altruism has a better fit. On the history of the concept on the German scene, see (Strachwitz, Priller, & Triebe, 2020).

Taylor expands this view, emphasizing, after Montesquieu and Tocqueville, that civil society is "amphibious": while formally independent of state power, it also penetrates and decentralizes it (Taylor, 1990b, p. 117). This amphibious character of civil society is manifested in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, where Taylor explains the mutations that gave rise to civil society as something independent of the sphere of power (non-governmental, therefore) but forming part of the public space, so that political power is "supervised and checked by something outside" (Taylor, 2004, p. 90).[167]

Taylor also warns of the dangers posed by the adoption of moral codes by the state, especially in the debates about the separation of Church and state. The French model, he argues, is tempted to claim "moral supremacy" out of, basically, fear of, hatred or misunderstanding of religion (Taylor, 2011k, p. 39, see also 2011l, 2017d; Bouchard & Taylor, 2008; Maclure & Taylor, 2011; cf. Gauchet, 1998, pp. 47–50; Ungureanu, 2022). Taylor also argues for the state's neutrality in religious matters and adheres to the need for the state to be based on principles such as the rule of law, human rights and equality. However, the *fetishization* of these principles must be avoided. Fetishization may happen if formulas were used that falsely cover up the dilemmas facing States, including how to integrate the different conceptions of the good life or human fulfillment. Thus, these arrangements—part of the historical sediment that forms our modern moral order—must be applied in practice not as ideological prescriptions but as instruments enabling the state to pursue its aims: the integration of all citizens through liberty, equality and fraternity.

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167 Undoubtedly, the amphibious character pointed out by Taylor is manifested in the increasing role given to love in current debates in spheres beyond the family. The more expressivist interpretations of freedom, in which, to some extent, Taylor also participates, and the democratization tendencies of the private sphere reflect the amphibious character of the civil sphere and the interdependence and permeability of its boundaries. Thus, today, family and state, which in Hegel have an antithetical relationship, are increasingly understood as two spheres that are not separated and that are at least "contaminated through each other" (Werner, 2008, p. 123), as expressed by feminist authors such as Luce Irigaray or Judith Butler (2015) who reduce the traditional distance between the political and the private. Taylor, however, has always been more focused on the new valuation of the ordinary in modernity, without really engaging in such debates (cf. Browne & Lynch, 2018, p. 62).

Within this broader framework, several social theorists have turned to love as a resource for social integration and recognition. In the dialectical space between the self-regulating economy and the sphere of public opinion, civil society offers a domain in which justice and goodness intersect, giving rise to mutual aid, solidarity and altruism. It is here that actions analogous to the Good Samaritan— breaking inherited bonds and inaugurating an *agape*-network—can meaningfully take place.

Debates in contemporary recognition theory deepen this insight. Scholars influenced by Hegel, such as Axel Honneth (1992) or Paul Ricoeur (2005) have sought to recover the role of love—and in Ricoeur's case, *agape*— as an alternative to justice and to the absolutization of norms within each social sphere. As we shall see, their work highlights how *agape* can appear in political and social movements as a transformative force capable of reconfiguring relations, fostering reconciliation and opening new moral horizons.

In this sense, civil society becomes a space where disinterested help, solidarity and altruistic action emerge as genuine possibilities. The symbolic power of the Good Samaritan's act—breaking kinship networks and initiating an *agape-network*—finds here its contemporary analogues.

6.3. The imaginary of solidarity and moral transformation

The preceding discussion may leave the impression that Taylor lacks a fully worked-out theory of institutions. Strictly speaking, this is true: there is no systematic doctrine of institutions in his work. Yet, following Costa's remark about Taylor's "unsystematic esprit de système" (Costa, 2017b, p. 623) we can reconstruct important aspects of such a theory by drawing together his reflections on civil society, social imaginaries and moral sources, especially as they bear on institutions of solidarity and humanitarianism. As we have seen, civil society and sociability are essential spaces for the development of the identity. There, we find the structures that allow some procedure and institutionalization without destroying the interpersonal, answering Millbank's question. To address this problem, it is essential to consider Taylor's notion of the social imaginary, which is the locus of lived ethics (*Sittlichkeit*).

According to Taylor, "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). In other place, he refers to it as "background", that is, "a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 13; see also Baran, 2013; Dreyfus, 1991; Searle, 1997).[168] The mutations affecting our standards of solidarity and helping others can be explained in terms of shifting social imaginaries. Once the importance of the civil sphere for the construction of collective identity is acknowledged, we can better understand the existence of NGOs, humanitarian agencies and philanthropy as expressions of the modern ideal of social order. Like civil society more generally, these institutions possess an amphibious character: they occupy an intermediate space between the private sphere and constituted power. The legitimacy of their existence, i.e., the faith that people show towards some institutions and which is the basis of their authority (*Legitimitätsglauben*, Weber, 2013, p. 450ff), is associated with how social practices allow the expression of the modern ideal of solidarity and its high moral standards.

In this sense, the legitimacy of institutionalized solidarity is, in a specific historical way, the fruit of successive mutations of the social imaginary. One might say that this story has a "mythical" origin in the parable of the Good Samaritan and develops into modern forms of organized solidarity and their theoretical articulations:

> "Our Outlook is dominated by modes of social imaginary that emerge from what I called the long march and has been shaped in one way or another by the modern ideal of order as mutual benefit. (…) virtually unchallenged benchmarks of legitimacy in our contemporary world —liberty, equality, human rights, democracy—can demonstrate how strong a hold this modern order exercises on our social imaginary. It constitutes a horizon we are virtually incapable of thinking beyond" (Taylor, 2004, p. 185).

Here Taylor does not mention altruism as a benchmark of legitimacy out of our social imaginary. However, as we have seen in the histor-

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168 It is important to recognize that social imaginaries rely on an image of pre-ontological knowledge of representations with a clear Heideggerian root (cf. Taylor, 2006).

ical reconstructions of both *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, these are part of how human beings make sense of their life together, through the avoidance of suffering and the advent of the *NGO era.*

In any case, in the literature, we find a debate about "humanitarian social imaginaries".[169] Craig Calhoun, in particular, reconstructs the modern imaginary of humanitarianism in explicit dialogue with Taylor (Calhoun, 2008b, 2008c). He deconstructs the "humanitarian imaginary": a vision in which the world is assumed to be progressing and humanitarian emergencies appear as exceptions or accidents. In this imaginary, humanitarian action attempts to respond to the imperative of reducing suffering, but it would be based on the same optimistic bias. Calhoun's historical account shows how humanitarian action as an ethical response to the suffering of strangers has become detached from political action aimed at strengthening human rights. This split between ethically and politically based action can be read as a new version of the charisma–institution dilemma: on one side, an apolitical, morally self-justified response that risks accommodating the status quo; on the other, more structural, lobbying-oriented work that is less immediate but potentially more effective for long-term transformation.

Nevertheless, as several critics note, clarifying the moral order behind humanitarian action can end up merely naming dilemmas without generating real critical leverage over the status quo or the "ideologies of humanitarian space" (Gregory, 2017, p. 105; Fassin, 2012). Somehow, being able to explain solidarity within an unjust moral order justifies that moral order and softens criticisms coming from the system itself (cf. Wilkinson, 2013). Returning to Taylor's framework, social imaginaries and moral orders remain useful tools for interpreting the moral, political and sociological meanings of humanitarianism—provided they are paired with a serious engagement with strong moral sources such as *agape.* However, this step

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169 Especially of interest in this discussion is the focus on the mass media impact of distant humanitarian disasters and their negative consequences for the construction of sound thinking or proper political judgment (cf. Boltanski, 1999; Bruckner, 2000; Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013; Chouliaraki & Morsing, 2010). Also of interest is the modern notion of how distant emergencies demand response, along with debates of how to channel the ethical impulses that motivate solidarity with strangers (cf. Ignatieff, 2004, 2017; Rieff, 2002; also of an interest Rawls, 2003; Pogge, 2008).

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must not result in eroding the critical and transformative capacity of organizations engaged in solidarity.

Clearly, the ascendancy of the modern order over the imaginary of solidarity is also shown in its excesses and defects, but this does not have to exhaust its critical power (Taylor, 2004, p. 184, 1999b, p. 25ff.). The social imaginary functions as a pre-normative background that both grounds and exceeds explicit norms, in the manner of hermeneutics. Although this prescription is a source of legitimacy and evaluative judgment, it does not exhaust the normative character (cf. Taylor, 2004, p. 9). The paradigm of the mutation of social imaginaries allows us to understand the changes in what Taylor calls the "normative picture" (Taylor, 2004, p. 159) and its contradictions, false justifications and mismatches. Identifying and deconstructing all of them allows us to point out where action can have an impact in order to be transformative. Thus, the transformative capacity of recognizing imaginaries can take us even further in this task than the critique of ideologies, precisely because we reach the anthropology behind common life, social practices and how human beings take their decisions. Yet imaginaries have limits: they describe the expression of goods within a social order, but not the deeper moral or spiritual transformations that sustain them—a point noted by critics of the imaginary concept, such as Habermas (1988) or Rawls (2005).[170]

The Good Samaritan illustrates how *agape* can interrupt an existing moral order and open a new horizon of meaning. In Taylor's terms, it discloses an *agape-network* within, rather than outside, the world—one that transforms without retreating into nostalgia for past forms of life. However, looking at the phenomenology of what happened to the Good Samaritan, it can be noticed that the first transformation took place in the moral sphere, that is, at the level of his motivation to help the wounded person out of compassion and

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170 Maili Steele summarizes the evaluation and criticism of social imaginaries: "Theorists of the imaginary have enabled us to think about normatively charged collective imaginaries as logically prior to the construction of normative principles. What theorists of the imaginary have not done is make specific connections between the ontological background of social imaginaries and the normative utterance" (Steele, 2017, p. 1046). On Habermas' critique, see (Kompridis, 2019). For the critique of Rawls, see (Voice, 2014; Brunkhorst, 2011)

its connection to a greater good. The Good Samaritan lived within a moral order, which, as always and everywhere, forms "inescapable frameworks for social life" (cf. Taylor, 2008, p. 225, 2011d, p. 374). *Agape,* however, allows him to glimpse another distinct moral order, the *agape-network*. It allows him not to abandon the world but to transform it. It is also what allows those who today are inspired by *agape* to remain motivated toward altruism without falling into excesses of trust, misogyny or the use of the weak for their own personal satisfaction without having to give up the incarnational spirituality that encourages them to transform the world, seeing its goodness and struggling to reduce its harmfulness. But above all, the Good Samaritan reveals that the real driver of transformation, even of any change in the social sphere, is the articulation of moral sources, that is, according to Taylor, in the way human beings give meaning to experience and make decisions concerning their lives.

This dynamic also allows us to understand the specific role played today by faith-based organizations within the humanitarian field. Located within the amphibious space of civil society, these organizations offer a concrete illustration of how mutations in the social imaginary and the moral order shape institutional responses to suffering. They show how *agape*-inspired motivations can be mediated by institutional forms without being extinguished, and how the charisma–institution tension central to Taylor's account reappears within the humanitarian field.

NGO's organizations exemplify the broader Taylorian claim that the modern moral order undergoes mutations rather than simple corruptions, even when their genealogy is entangled with Illich's critique. As we have shown earlier, Taylor sees the rise of civil society—including the proliferation of humanitarian NGOs—as a product of the same historical forces that shaped modern solidaristic imaginaries. These organizations participate in the moral demands of the age and also contribute to defining collective identity, since altruism and concern for the vulnerable have become characteristic markers of modern moral life.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to ask what distinctive role faith-based organizations may play in a secular society, as institutions grounded on a specific altruistic motivation linked to *agape*

as a moral source.[171] Faith-based organizations constitute a particularly illustrative case of how *agape* continues to operate within the modern social imaginary. Situated in the amphibious space of civil society, they channel motivations rooted in religious traditions into institutional forms that respond to humanitarian suffering. In doing so, they show how *agape*-inspired action is not exhausted by the secular moral order but persists as a living moral source capable of informing contemporary practices of care and solidarity. Although their genealogy is inseparable from the broader mutations that gave rise to modern humanitarianism, their distinctive contribution lies in sustaining a vertical orientation—an openness to transcendence—that can deepen the meaning of altruistic engagement.

At the same time, these organizations face the same pressures that shape the modern imaginary of solidarity: professionalization, bureaucratization, and the trend toward codifying humanitarian action in secular terms (cf. Ager & Ager, 2011; Hollenbach, 2019). Such developments can weaken the charismatic impulse that originally animated many of these institutions, sharpening the tension between witness and effectiveness, compassion and managerial rationality. In Taylor's terms, these dynamics reflect the long process of *excarnation* and the drift toward an *immanent frame* that risks severing *agape* from its embodied, transformational roots. Yet they also highlight the continuing relevance of the charisma–institution dilemma:

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171 Faith-based (non-profit) organizations may be defined as "those humanitarian relief and development organizations formed by or with a direct or indirect relationship to a specific faith community" (Khafagy, 2020, p. 3). Such definition, however, is too generic and may include both JRS or Caritas International, but also other organizations that may use violent or anti-human rights means, such as jihadist organizations that threaten personal and global security. Or, more specifically, organizations with very offensive and aggressive methods of proselytizing, which display religious fundamentalism, an instrumentalization of religion for political purposes and a very sharp differentiation with respect to non-believers or those not belonging to the group (Cf. Dietrich & Müller, 2007, pp. 12–13). By faith-based organizations we mean those entities with principles and ideals based on a particular faith dedicated to humanitarian work, providing assistance in areas such as health care, education, community development and disaster relief. Although they may include evangelization or missionary practices in their humanitarian work, here we will focus on their exercise of assistance and advocacy without regard to their possible religious proselytism (cf. Ferris, 2005).

the challenge of institutionalizing altruism without reducing it to procedural norms detached from its moral sources.

Precisely for this reason, faith-based organizations can play a critical role in today's humanitarian landscape. By remaining connected to strong moral sources, they are able to resist the complete absorption of solidarity into a purely secular, instrumental logic. They function as sites where *agape*-oriented individuals articulate their motivations, renew the background understandings that sustain solidarity, and project their commitments into the wider civil sphere (cf. Uríbarri Bilbao, 2022, p. 47). In this sense, they illustrate the broader Taylorian claim that genuine moral transformation begins at the level of sources and self-understanding, and only subsequently shapes social imaginaries and institutional forms.

6.4. An argument in favor of the non-translatability of agape

The role of faith-based organizations already suggests that *agape* can still find institutional footholds within the modern social imaginary, even under the pressures of secularization and procedural rationality. Their capacity to sustain strong moral sources and to project them into the wider civil sphere reveals how *agape* remains operative as a transformative force, not only in interpersonal relations but also in public life. This observation leads naturally to a broader question: how does *agape* reappear in the contemporary public sphere, amid deep diversity, competing articulations of the good, and the demands of democratic coexistence?

Taylor's answer begins from a recognition of the profound pluralism present in organizations dedicated to the common good and to helping those in need (cf. Taylor, 1994a). He is aware of the diversity of articulations of the good, potentially as many as possible committed individuals, even in a faith organization.

> "Thus we see how today in the sphere of humanitarian work, people of all convictions, religious and non-religious, work side by side. They are in a sense actuated by the same impulse, but some very different ethics lie behind the common dedication in each case: different views of human life, of the possibilities of transformation, of the modes of

spiritual or mental discipline that are to be engaged in, and so on" (Taylor, 2011c, p. 299).

Shared action here does not imply shared articulations of the good; rather, a common moral impulse is underwritten by divergent ethical backgrounds, different accounts of transformation, and distinct conceptions of the disciplines required to sustain moral life. Many Catholic organizations dedicated to the third sector are, in fact, pluralistic meeting places where people with different ideals converge to work together to pursue a common noble goal.

Such cooperation, however, always faces the risk that deep moral sources will be muted under the pressure of institutional neutrality, efficiency, or the demand for a minimal, supposedly universal "overlapping consensus" (cf. Rawls, 2005, pp. 133–171), Taylor warns that this consensus, while necessary for democratic coexistence, can easily become fetishized, obscuring the plurality of principles at stake and preventing genuine confrontation with the dilemmas facing contemporary societies—including those of diversity, recognition, and the articulation of constitutive goods (Taylor, 2011k, p. 42). In this respect, the experience of humanitarian organizations mirrors a wider structural tension in modern democracies: the need to coordinate action across profound ethical differences without silencing the sources that make such action meaningful.

Taylor uses this argument by referring to the debates on the different models of secularity, particularly focusing on the French model of *laicité* (cf. Maclure & Taylor, 2011). Thus, on the one hand, "we are condemned to live an overlapping consensus" (Taylor, 2011k, p. 47) since it is part of the modern social imaginary, even apart from its establishment in operative principles in a constitutional state. But on the other hand, it is something relatively recent in history, something problematic and still open to adjustments, but which runs the risk of fetishization and of slamming shut many of the dilemmas facing today's societies, such as diversity and recognition (cf. Taylor, 1992a).

In any case, a sample of the fetishization of overlapping consensus comes through the use of neutral languages (see also Taylor, 2011j). Taylor, in dialogue with Rawls (2005) and Habermas (2005), questions the expectation that all democratic participants adopt a single neutral, rational language. Thus, religious speech ends up being asked in these accounts to leave out of its discourse those "extraneous premises that only believers can accept" (Taylor, 2011k,

p. 49) or demanding their translation into an intelligible language that everyone can understand. Taylor is tough on this pretension, which he even calls *tyrannical*. Taylor points to the pretensions of this language of neutrality as evidence of the difficulties of many rational discourses to truly accept diversity and channel it into a diverse society. The problem, he argues, stems from a persistent Enlightenment prejudice that treats religion as inherently dangerous and views revelation as illegitimate in matters of public concern (cf. Taylor, 2011k, pp. 52–53).

Having recognized this bias, Taylor sees no need to demand of a believer that he should not aspire to articulate and practice in the public sphere the normative contents of his discourse on the grounds that only neutral language can resolve moral-political issues:

> "If we take key statements of our contemporary political morality, such as those attributing rights to human beings as such, say the right to life, I cannot see how the fact that we are desiring/enjoying/suffering beings, or the perception that we are rational agents, should be any surer basis for this right than the fact that we are made in the image of God" (García Caladín, 2010; see Mestiri, 2008; Reder & Schmidt, 2008; Sepúlveda del Río, 2018; Taylor, 2011k, p. 54; Ungureanu & Monti, 2018).

Indeed, in the heat of a discussion with Habermas following these statements, Taylor spontaneously acknowledges that he cannot agree with this distinction between ethics and religion and with discriminating discourses on the basis of deep psychological background (cf. Taylor & Habermas, 2011, pp. 62–63; see also Hoyeck, 2021). Meanwhile, Habermas constantly draws attention to the capacity of religious language to inspire semantic content, even to motivate toward the common good and altruism. But he does not abandon the idea of the existence of a more neutral language that would allow a greater consensus on ethical issues in the public sphere by fulfilling some condition of universality (cf. Holzienkemper, 2016). Hence the requirement of translation of religious language because of its incommensurable character or, in the case of this discussion, because of its significant relationship with just a very small community of speakers:

> "The difference is that religious influences belong to a kind of family of discourse in which you do not just move within a worldview, or within a

cognitive interpretation of a domain of human life, but you are speaking out, as I said, from an experience that is tied up with your membership in a community" (Taylor & Habermas, 2011, p. 63).

Taylor's response is remarkably pithy: "The difference is that I'm saying you can't have translations for those kinds of references because they are the references that really touch on certain people's spiritual lives and not others" (ibid.). Religious language refers to articulations of the good, which result in a specific type of normativity unique to a particular spiritual community. The story we have narrated with Taylor shows us that, even if we understand it as a series of mutations in the social imaginary, any translation of concepts that refer to the spiritual heritage, such as *agape*, goes hand in hand with a loss. This loss refers not only to its meaning but also to the possibility of unfolding the full potential of its articulation.

Thus, following the commandment to love one's neighbor through an *agape*-based experience such as the Good Samaritan is undoubtedly not easily translatable into another kind of articulation of good or reasoning that motivates toward philanthropy. Today the parable of the Good Samaritan is typically interpreted through the lens of an *overlapping consensus*: most modern readers praise the Samaritan and fault the priest and the Levite. Not so in Jesus' time, as we know. Any attempt to translate this compassion into alternative moral languages inevitably entails some loss of semantic nuance. *Agape* is not a moral motivator comparable to others that also motivate toward the love of neighbor, for example, natural sympathy, altruism as social interest, the rational vision of the dignity of every human being, or indignation in the face of injustice. *Agape* and the spiritual experience that sustains it are therefore only partially translatable into alternative ethical frameworks. To make *agape* comprehensible, we have only analogy, adaptation, or the use of other translation procedures such as compensation or paraphrasing. However, more is needed to exhaust the semantic meaning of *agape* and its specific way of motivating us to charity.

This would open us to theological problems about the adequacy of spiritual languages or the issue of private languages, which are beyond the scope of this research. Remaining to add is that Taylor sees untranslated religious language operating far more unproblematically within the public space on its own terms and being easily understood by people than Habermas's or Rawls's cautions seem

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to allow. Moreover, religious language provokes political motivation and mobilization. Here Taylor draws reference, not without irony, to Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement:

> "Were Martin Luther King's secular compatriots unable to understand what he was arguing for when he put the case for equality in biblical terms? Would more people have got the point had he invoked Kant? And besides, how does one distinguish religious from secular language? Is the Golden Rule clearly a move in either one or the other?" (Taylor, 2011k, p. 58, note 13).

In our study, we can understand this allusion to the power of religious language in politics as a plea for *agape* and its effect on the public sphere and civil society through the admiration generated by the person inspired by it and the motivation or elevation of horizons it fosters. The fact that the public understood MLK despite he used religious language is not only an example of an inclusive interpretation of non-public reasons (cf. Rawls, 2005, p. 250), but somehow, he was able to connect those who listened to his speeches with a source of meaning strong enough to mobilize for social change (cf. Johnson, 2001). Beyond the argument of respect for religious language and the limitation of neutral language, there is behind Taylor's conviction that religion helps in the construction of the collective narrative and that there are certain charismatic figures who manage to elevate conflictive situations to a different order largely because of their connection with transcendent moral sources.[172]

Beyond this, it is important to clarify that speaking of the "untranslatability" of *agape* does not mean that its effects or its practical expressions become opaque within a secular context. What remains untranslatable, in Taylor's sense, is not the action inspired by *agape*

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172 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, for their part, describe Martin Luther King's speeches as a moment of the sacred, which they describe as a "physis phenomenon," drawing on Homer and his description of the way real things appear before us, as experiences in which they appear, take us over and hold us for a certain time and finally let us go: "Many people, for instance, felt their sense of themselves and their world come into focus during the speech by Martin Luther King Jr. on the National Mall" (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 202; cf. Taylor, 2011a, p. 123ff). The "I Have a Dream" speech is an example of sacred as physis at its best: "paradigms will shift and the culture will come to understand itself in new and more shining and meaningful ways" (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 220).

—such as compassion, hospitality or neighbor-love—nor the capacity of secular interlocutors to understand or even admire such action, as the case of Martin Luther King illustrates. What resists translation is the full spiritual articulation that gives *agape* its meaning for believers: the reference to Incarnation, grace, *theosis*, or to a divine call that constitutes the agent's freedom. Actions motivated by *agape* can enter the shared space of an *overlapping consensus*, but the moral source from which they arise cannot be rendered into neutral moral language without loss. Thus, there is no contradiction between *agape* functioning as a powerful motivator of unneighborly love in a pluralistic society and its conceptual irreducibility to secular categories such as sympathy, humanitarian concern or respect for dignity. The practical convergence that takes place in humanitarian or civic action coexists with a deeper divergence of moral sources. The idea of untranslatability therefore marks the limits of conceptual equivalence, not the limits of mutual intelligibility or cooperation in the public sphere.

The role of religious language—and of those who speak from within it—should not be underestimated in the public sphere. In this sense, charitable organizations can be that space where individuals can express the way of life (*Lebensform*) that is born of the love of neighbor motivated by *agape*. Beyond the possibility of using rational language for dialogue with others or using instrumental reason to achieve ends, the possibility of the spontaneous use of religious statements in the public space is important for the identity of individuals and thus for organizations within civil society. Taylor's point is that such spontaneous exercise is also for the benefit of society as a whole.

Taylor's reliance on religious language stems from his general view of language. Language allows for a kind of reflective consciousness that goes beyond its merely designative or agreement-facilitating function (cf. Taylor, 1991a).[173] Language facilitates the transformation

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173 Language includes speech and writing, designation, discussion, agreement, of course, but also bodily actions, enactments, gestures, posture, tones of voice, art, the way of giving meaning to what is lived, and openness or closedness to transcendence. Each of these modes expresses, but more crucially, they constitute and signify. Language, including religious language, encapsulates culture and value (cf. Taylor, 2016, p. 333). With his vision of language, beyond its role of facilitator of agreements, Taylor wants to point out the importance

of the human being and social reality. Furthermore, it makes it possible to give meaning to what is beyond life, "metabiological meanings", among which is *agape*, as we shall see when speaking of transcendence. These meanings, also called human meanings,

> "concern goals, purposes, and discriminations of better or worse, which can't be defined in terms of objectively recognizable states or patterns. If what I seek is a meaningful life, or a profound sense of peace, or to be at one with the world, to be reconciled with things, to enjoy deep communion with my loved ones, and the like, what I'm after can't be captured in some objectively identifiable pattern" (Taylor, 2016, pp. 91–92).

Beyond a theory about language in the public space and the use of *subtler language* capable of inspiring and motivating,[174] Taylor draws attention to the need not to be too fixated on the use of codes. Hence the importance of civil society institutions inspired by religious values based on *agape*, which facilitate and bring closer the normative articulation of strong evaluations at the individual moral level, as well as at the social and political level (cf. Taylor, 2016, pp. 192–193).

6.5. The place of agape in social philosophy

The analysis developed in this chapter has shown that *agape* does not disappear in modernity but undergoes a series of mutations that shape both the social imaginary of solidarity and the institutional practices that embody it. By examining the charisma–institution tension from Illich through Taylor, we have seen how *agape* can be obscured by codification and proceduralism, yet also mediated— however imperfectly—by the institutions of civil society, including humanitarian NGOs and faith-based organizations. These organiza-

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of giving meaning to our lives and also to why we care for others. That is why language defines and redefines "our desires and longings in order to be able to live with the pattern of fulfillments and frustrations we undergo. This turns out to be an unending human task, which in its later modes we could describe as: finding the meanings which can make sense—bearable sense—of our lives" (Taylor, 2016, p. 63).

174 We will take a closer look to charismatic characters and their use of language in chapter 8.

tions demonstrate that strong moral sources can still find expression within the modern imaginary and that *agape* retains a social and cultural presence even under the pressures of secularization and excarnation.

This insight opens the way to the next stage of our inquiry. Until now, we have considered *agape* primarily as a moral source that animates individual motivation and shapes social imaginaries indirectly through practices, institutions, and collective self-understandings. In the following chapter, we turn to a different but complementary dimension: the place of *agape* within social philosophy, particularly in Taylor's theory of recognition.

Taylor's work on recognition is one of his most influential contributions to contemporary political theory. Yet, as we will argue, this discourse also implicitly presupposes elements that resonate strongly with the logic of *agape*: the possibility of moral transformation in and through relationality, the opening of new horizons beyond entrenched conflicts, and the role of generosity, forgiveness, and the vertical dimension in reconfiguring social bonds. These themes—already anticipated in Taylor's reflections on the Good Samaritan, the *agape-network*, and the vertical space of reconciliation—reappear with particular force in debates on identity, multiculturalism and the politics of recognition, where Taylor's authority is widely acknowledged (cf. Iser, 2019; Browne & Lynch, 2018, p. 35; Abbey, 2000, pp. 55–99; N. H. Smith, 2002; Stahl, 2013, pp. 72–94; Correa Román, 2022).

As we have already introduced in this chapter, *agape* can play a role in conflict resolution and social transformation. Through openness to the vertical dimension, it is possible to foster relationality within society, collective articulation of goods, and forgiveness and generosity as a way of opening new horizons. As we will try to show, these elements found in Taylor's theory can best be understood as the presence of *agape* in his approach, even though he does not explicitly mention its role. To a large extent, the next chapter will attempt to show that, as other authors have explicitly attempted to do in their theories of recognition, we can trace the influence of *agape* in Taylor's thinking on recognition and multiculturalism. Indeed, we think that understanding his position on recognition from *agape* may rekindle some lost interest in his theory.